

Special Forum: Rand & Philosophy

A Philosopher for the New Millennium?

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Ayn Rand's novels, especially *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, belong among the literary masterpieces of the twentieth century. They have had a profound impact upon many readers, and contributed, arguably, to recent momentous political changes in the United States and, consequently, throughout the rest of the world. Rand's fictional heroes in their deeds and words—in particular, Howard Roark's courtroom defense and John Galt's radio speech—proclaimed a world view and a sense of life radically at variance with the prevailing culture. Her writings suggested earlier influences: of Nietzsche, of Aristotle, and of early classical liberals. But Ayn Rand was no mere eclectic. Whatever ideas she may have gleaned from others were transmuted into a brilliant new intellectual vision, which she called "Objectivism". The outlines of this were set forth in a short monograph, *An Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, and in a number of brief popular essays and speeches, written in a lively style and often with a polemical edge, which appear in collections such as *The Virtue of Selfishness*, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, and *Philosophy: Who Needs It*. She did not employ the conventional idiom of academic philosophers, attend conferences, or submit papers to scholarly journals. She disparaged many past philosophical "greats" and did not conceal her disdain for academic philosophy as generally practiced. This accounts in part for why—aside from their unorthodox content—her writings are seldom mentioned in academic publications.

Ayn Rand contributed many noteworthy ideas, notwithstanding, including those briefly enumerated below. The most familiar of these concern her views on ethical egoism, but she also made insightful contributions to the theory of knowledge, with which the list begins:

Reason Papers 23 (Fall 1998): 66-69, Copyright © 1998.

1. In epistemology, Rand argued that consciousness is not a passive state but an active process involving differentiation and integration of the data of awareness. She challenged the view (which she attributed to philosophers as disparate as Aristotle and Kant) that consciousness could know things in themselves without distortion only if it were like a diaphanous medium.

2. Rand formulated a theory of concepts which contained a solution to the traditional problem of universals and an account of the relationship of reason to perception which differed from both empiricism and rationalism. She sought to reconcile the primacy of reason with the cognitively basic status of perception.

3. Rand pointed out the contextual nature of knowledge: we can form a concept or grasp a fact only in a specific context. We must explain facts and define our concepts in terms of fundamental characteristics, but a characteristic is fundamental only in relation to a specific context of knowledge. She endorsed a version of essentialism, but argued, contrary to Aristotle, that essences are epistemological rather than metaphysical. By emphasizing the role of context, her epistemology avoided the traditional dichotomies of foundationalism and coherentism.

4. Rand also maintained the importance of axiomatic concepts such as existence, identity, and consciousness. She viewed these as epistemological guidelines necessary for a rational consciousness. Because they are fundamental they cannot be deduced from anything else, but can only be defended indirectly by negative demonstration.

5. In ethics, Rand repudiated the orthodox non-cognitivism according to which reason is unable to apprehend the ultimate ends of actions. She rejected the irrationalism of Nietzsche and other philosophers associated with moral individualism. She sought, however, to accommodate the fundamental role of volition and reason in ethics.

6. In her theory of value, she analyzed value as the object of action, and she argued that values are objective rather than intrinsic or subjective. (The latter dichotomy contributes to the perennial

problem of deriving "ought" from "is.") Her treatment anticipated the now widely discussed "agent-relative" theories of values and reasons. Based on this analysis of value, she argued that life is the ultimate value for human agents.

7. Rand defended egoism as a theory of moral conduct. She argued that a version of egoism could be rationally defended, and that this was consistent with a moral, virtuous way of life. Interestingly, many interpreters of classical ethics have come independently to the view that ancient philosophers such as Aristotle also viewed virtue and self-interest as fundamentally in accord.

8. Rand's theory of rights has affinities with John Locke's theory, in which the right to liberty and the right to private property have primacy, but his theory had only a vague and weakly defended theistic basis. Rand gave a secular derivation of rights from her theory of life as the ultimate value.

9. In political theory Rand defended the minimal state against the totalitarian and welfare state ideologies that were dominant in her day. On many specific policy issues she agreed with libertarian theorists, but she argued that a clear and stable political theory must be based on a rationally defended theory of rights. She opposed the view that politics should be based on ungrounded precepts or pragmatic strategies.

10. In political economy Rand argued for *laissez faire* capitalism at a time when the superiority (and historical inevitability) of socialism was widely pronounced. However, Rand was exceptional in arguing that capitalism was superior not only in terms of efficiency but also on moral grounds.

The foregoing list very sketchily describes some of Ayn Rand's main contributions to philosophy. She argued for these positions in an inimitably succinct and incisive manner. When she first advanced these views, they would have been rejected by nearly every recognized philosopher. Today, it is noteworthy that some influential academic philosophers have taken positions rather close to hers on some issues in epistemology and ethics. Perhaps her deepest insights concern the nature of consciousness, the contextual character of knowledge, and the agent-

relativity of value. These distinguish her philosophy of Objectivism from other forms of realism. Because she did not write systematic treatises expounding her ideas, they are still not well understood, even by those in basic sympathy with them. It remains to be seen how she will influence the new millennium. Ayn Rand's philosophical legacy has scarcely begun to be realized.